any official of Forest Department in the recent seizure of wildlife products in Delhi.

(d) The steps taken by the Government to protect the wild life and its habitat include:

(1) Hunting of Scheduled wild animals has been banned by law

(2) Central assitance is provided to State/UT Governments for strengthening anti-poaching infrastructure.

(3) A network of wildlife Sanctuaries and National Parks have been set up for conservation of wild flora and fauna. Financial assistance is provided by the Central Govt. for development of National Parks and Sanctuaries on request from the State Governments.

(4) Special schemes for protection and conservation of tigers, elephants and rhinos have been implemented.

(5) Raids are carried out by the Wildlife Authorities whenever information of illegal trading in wild animals reaches them.

(6) Cooperation of Police, BSF, Coast Guard and Army is also taken in apprehending the poachers and illegal traders.

(7) International trade in endangered species of animals and articles made thereof, is regulated under the provisions of the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). India is a signatory to the convention.

(8) Regional and sub-regional offices of Wildlife Preservation are set up mostly at the main export centres of the country to prevent smuggling of wildlife products.

(9) There is a scheme for payment of reward to the informers which, among other things, helps in getting intelligence regarding smuggling of wildlife products.

Opening of New Regional Passport Offices in important cities

2734. SHRI SUBRAMANIAN SWAMY: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that there is a demand to open new Regional Passport Offices in more places in Tamil Nadu;

(b) whether it is also a fact that there are also demands to open more Regional Passport Offices in other important cities in the country;

(c) if so, what steps are being taken by Government to set-up these new Offices;

(d) what steps are being taken to streamline the issue of New Passports;

(e) what is the present average waiting period for issue of New Passports: and

(f) what steps are being taken to reduce the waiting period?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R.L. BHATIA): (a) to (f) Requests have been received from time to time for opening more Passport Offices in various states including Tamil Nadu. The opening of new Passport Offices is based on various parameters including workload and resources available. The opening of new Passport Offices does not in itself improve the service until the necessary infrastructure and personnel are available. The Government is, therefore, concentrating on clearing the backlog of pending application and on streamlining the process of issue of passports.

The time taken to issue a passport varies from one office to another depending on various factors including the workload. Government have taken a number of steps including augmentation of staff strength, increased supply of passport booklets, introduction of an incentive scheme, upgradation of office facilities and a review of systems and procedures in order to increase productivity and reduce delays.